

Are fees taking the 'open' out of MOOC?

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The for-credit MOOC comes with a fee.

Massive open online courses (MOOC) that include nominal costs don't constitute a financial burden to online students, though the mere inclusion of fees undermines a key tenant of MOOCs, educators say.

The idea of world-class educational content available to anyone in the world with an internet connection and a willingness to learn was a central appeal to those interested in MOOCs over the past couple years.

With more MOOCs requiring students to purchase some pricey class materials – such as textbooks – skeptics of MOOC platforms have raised concerns about the future of supposedly “open” web-based college courses.

The latest criticism came after Altius Education, in partnership with Tiffin University, announced a for-credit MOOC that will be headed by a fulltime university faculty member. [Altius's MOOC](#) [2], made available through the online platform Helix, comes with a \$50 administrative fee.

Robert Schuwer, a faculty member at [The Open University](#) [3], said students hoping to earn college credit through MOOCs should expect some sort of fee, but MOOC completion – without credits attached – should be available for free.

“Bottom line for me, a [student] should at least be able to participate in [a MOOC] without having to spent any money, neither on textbooks nor on registration fee,” Schuwer said. “Now it gives a taste of, ‘Hey, let’s call this a MOOC, because in the current hype we will attract more attention.’ Although ill-defined, general commitment to [being open] in MOOC is the free availability, not only ‘open to everyone who wants to attend.’”

“I am not too afraid this will open a floodgate for further charges,” he continued. “What I do expect are a greater variety of services offered around MOOCs, without affecting the free core of a MOOC.”

Tiffin University President Paul Marion said the school decided to make the “Foundations of Success” program available through Helix because it had proven popular with Tiffin students.

“So many of our students have told us how this particular course has had such a positive impact on them, and not just in the context of their college education but throughout their lives,” Marion said in an announcement. “We want to make this course available to more people, who can benefit from its instruction.

The university’s fulltime faculty members will grade class assignments and provide feedback on course discussions – roles not often taken by faculty in MOOCs.

Altius Education CEO Paul Freedman acknowledged that the increasing polarization of MOOCs in higher education.

“There’s a lot of positive and negative buzz about MOOCs and online learning right now,” Freedman said. “MOOCs and online courses aren’t for everyone; they do however present a new opportunity to help more people access quality educational content. Our goal with this MOOC is to make sure they also receive a quality educational experience.”

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[1] Image: <http://www.ecampusnews.com/files/2013/06/onlinestudent9.jpg>

[2] Altius's MOOC: http://ivybridge.tiffin.edu/?agid=pr&netid=Vocus&cmid=IBC&kwid=20130611&adid=MOOCRelease_20130611&utm_source=PR&utm_medium=PressRelease&utm_campaign=MO

[3] The Open University: <http://www.open.ac.uk/>